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# EAST TIMOR: IT'S TIME TO TALK

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A paper presented by Merrill Findlay
to the UN Decolonisation Committee hearings on East Timor,
New York, August 7, 1991,
on behalf of the Australian Council for Overseas Aid
and the East Timor Talks Committee, Melbourne.

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# EAST TIMOR: IT'S TIME TO TALK

Presented to the UN Decolonisation Committee by Merrill Findlay
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New York, August 7, 1991

Mr Chairman, distinguished members of the Committee, fellow petitioners: thank you for the opportunity to speak with you here today. The organisation I represent, the Australian Council for Overseas Aid, has petitioned you in the past, but we are anxious to do so again in what is now a new political climate. And in view of the excellent role the United Nations has played in Namibia and Western Sahara recently, and the unprecedented attention being given to long-term and seemingly intractable issues by the US, USSR and Britain, we believe the time is now right for a fresh attempt to resolve the ongoing conflict in East Timor. Talks are now being facilitated on Palestine, Cyprus and Northern Ireland - why not, in 1991, UN sponsored talks on East Timor too? We would like to see **all** interested parties in that conflict, sit down at a round table - and just begin to talk. Not about the past, but about the future.

When General Murdani gave the order to invade East Timor sixteen years ago, the world was a very different place. Many of the issues that dominated international affairs then have now disappeared from the global political agenda. In the nineties, that agenda is dominated by regional conflicts and ethnic demands for autonomy that challenge many of our established concepts of sovereignty: I have already mentioned Palestine, Northern Ireland and Cyprus, but we can add to that list the Baltic states, Yugoslavia, Quebec, Bougainville, Tibet, Kashmir, Sri Lanka, Kurdistan, the Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Kuwait.

In the 1990s, it is clear that the concept of self-determination must be considered far more broadly than when East Timor was added to the list of non-self governing territories in 1960.

As Australia's delegate to the Commission on Human Rights in Geneva on February 1, 1991, said in his formal statement:

> ..... *Peoples are seeking to assert their identities, to preserve their languages, cultures and traditions and to achieve greater self management and autonomy,*

> *free from undue interference from central governments. This poses difficult dilemmas for many governments. Many fear it could be difficult to reconcile greater autonomy for particular communities with preservation of hard-won national unity and with prospects for economic growth and development.*
>
> *.... the challenge for governments will be to respond effectively to the growing demands, by displaying sympathy for legitimate concerns and maintaining harmony and the full protection and promotion of human rights and by devising new understandings, structures and institutions.*

Australian political scientist Dr Herb Feith sees recent challenges to national sovereignty as a second generation of claims to self-determination, "by peoples whose grievances are not against a Western European colonial ruler as in the first decades after 1945, but against rulers who have manifestly failed in certain regions of their state to fashion a legitimate form of rule." (Walsh, Scott, Feith 1991) He argues that East Timor can be viewed just as well in this context as it can be as a classic first generation case of incomplete decolonisation.

From Indonesia's point of view, of course, the East Timorese have already expressed their right of self determination and have chosen integration - though such a view has little credibility on the world stage. Indonesia also claims that conditions have improved significantly in East Timor since 1975 and that the East Timorese are better off now than they have ever been. Materially this may be so. Nevertheless independent observers still return from the former Portuguese territory shocked by what they describe as the misery, trauma, fear and repression they find there. At a seminar in Washington sponsored by the Social Science Research Council of the US and the Ford Foundation this year, Bishop Paul Moore, retired Episcopal Archbishop of New York, Allan Nairn of the New Yorker magazine and Robert Archer from London's Catholic Institute for International Relations all expressed deep concern about what they had seen during their recent visits to East Timor.

But the military leader of the East Timorese Resistance, Xanana Gusmao, agrees that there have been certain material improvements in living standards since the Indonesian occupation. In an historic interview with Australian lawyer Robert Domm in September 1990, he described those improvements as "a strategy on the part of Jakarta to subjugate the people." He stated that

> *There aren't any material benefits which could compensate for our sacrifices. ..... a paved road and some houses have no value ..... The Maubere people have their own sense of honour and pride in themselves. Material benefits are only to satisfy daily needs and aren't an end in themselves. So our people not only don't benefit from the material improvements, but these are in conflict with their own concepts of life, with their way of living ...."*

Even sources from within Indonesia admit now that despite the millions of development dollars that have been spent, Timor remains a deeply traumatised and alienated society that is dominated socially, politically, economically and militarily from Jakarta. In March 1990 a team of social scientists led by prominent economist Professor Mubyarto from Gadjah Mada University Research Centre for Village and Regional Development in Yogyakarta, released a report entitled *East Timor: The Impact of Integration.* This report was commissioned by the Bank of Indonesia and The Local Development Planning Board for the Province of East Timor and was based on the systematic study of several villages

around Dili. It concluded, amongst other things, that the people of East Timor suffer from an 'overdose' of the military.

While the Mubyarto study offers no support for the independence struggle, it does acknowledge that there *is* a very serious problem in East Timor, and challenges the orthodox Indonesian government position. It recommends a reduction in troop levels and an end to economic monopolies. It also calls for the disbanding of the resettlement centres into which the majority of Timorese villagers were forcibly moved in the 1980s, and, most importantly, the democratisation of decision making so the East Timorese can have a greater say in decisions that affect their own destiny.

The basic reality in East Timor is that there is still a war being waged and no amount of economic development or rationalisation can obscure that fact. From the East Timorese point of view, that war is a war of liberation and it continues to disrupt the life of every family. In the interview with Robert Domm, Xanana Gusmao described the territorial counter insurgency methods the Indonesians are practicing and the US supplied military equipment being used against guerilla fighters and civilians. He also described in general terms the clandestine groups, the well organised underground movement and the role of the clergy in supporting the ongoing struggle for self determination.

He estimated that the war related deaths in East Timor since the invasion had been *greater* than 200,000, and that Indonesia had lost 25-30,000 military personnel in that time.

During the interview, Domm commented to Xanana Gusmao that

> *... many people may argue that while what has happened in East Timor may be unfortunate, it is now impossible for East Timor to be independent. Realistically, how likely is it that you can achieve your goals, and how long are you prepared to suffer the deprivations of a guerilla life in the bush?*

Xanana replied:

> *Realistically it's not appropriate for me to tell you here whether I think it's possible for us to achieve independence. We are geared towards the defence of our rights and realistically, all our people desire that. If many people argue that it's impossible for East Timor to be independent at the moment, I think they see the question in a simplistic way.*
>
> *The problem of East Timor is not so simple for Indonesia and the world. We're prepared to continue to resist for as long as necessary, as long as Jakarta doesn't adopt a more flexible, just and responsible attitude.*
>
> *We're prepared to accept our own extermination, as long as Jakarta thinks that there's only one way to solve the problem, that there exists only the use of force to make us surrender. So only after Jakarta shows more flexibility can I more realistically comment on how we could achieve independence.*

Robert Domm:

> *What are your proposals for a solution in East Timor? Would you be prepared to compromise, for example, to gain autonomy within Indonesia and yet be*

*free to run internal affairs, with Jakarta running other matters like foreign affairs and defence?*

Xanana Gusmao:

*I can't comment on that since I'm only one person and the leadership of the struggle involves Falantil, as well as the nationalist parties.*

*Many proposals have been sent to the world, but none has been responded to. I can only say that I'm ready to discuss any project for a solution without preconditions, and under the auspices of the United Nations.*

*Obviously nothing could take place here if there was no cease fire because there would be physical threats to us. So the only essential condition to discuss proposals for a solution is the ceasefire.*

The flexibility of the East Timorese Resistance, and the willingness of the Falantil military leader to begin negotiations without preconditions, represents a real opportunity for the international community - through the UN - to honour the many resolutions that have been made in both the General Assembly and the Security Council regarding the decolonisation of East Timor. Namibia has been settled, Western Sahara is on the way to being settled: now it is time to give the people of East Timor an opportunity to live in peace and to decide their own future. Only then can the problems identified in the Gadjah Mada University Research Centre report be solved.

The Australian Council for Overseas Aid, a co-ordinating body representing 90 non-governmental organisations involved in the field of overseas aid and development, is now sponsoring a proposal which builds upon those already presented to the international community by Xanana Gusmao, East Timor's Bishop Belo, the Portuguese government and others including members of the European Parliament, the United States Congress and the Japanese Diet. It is a proposal which also complements the recommendations made by Professor Mubyarto and his colleagues at Gadjah Mada University, and the work being done by the UN Secretary General to bridge the differences between Indonesia and Portugal.

This Australian non-government proposal is now being promoted nationally and globally by the East Timor Talks Committee based in Melbourne, and will be developed more fully during this year. It simply calls for **round table discussions without preconditions about the future of East Timor**. Participants in the talks would include representatives of the governments of Portugal and Indonesia, the East Timorese military leader Xanana Gusmao, representatives of the East Timorese political parties and the Roman Catholic Church, plus the UN Secretary General. The UN would convene the discussions.

Under this proposal, the talks would be open and wide ranging. They may include discussion of a staged peace process beginning with a ceasefire followed by the introduction of a UN peace keeping force for example. A range of options for the future status of East Timor may be considered from full independence to some form of 'free association' between Indonesia and East Timor.

Discussions might also consider safeguards for Indonesia. These might include base facilities for the Indonesian navy and airforce in East Timor, the continued use of Indonesian currency, and links with ASEAN. Such arrangements could be formalised through the United Nations. An on-going international presence, possibly including Portugal, ASEAN and the UN itself, might be considered to effectively guarantee and sustain the agreed arrangements.

As Jose Ramos Horta, one of the campaign's many supporters, commented in Melbourne recently,

> *The round table discussions should be just a mechanism, a forum to air differences, to begin a process that would create climate of confidence in which the conflict could finally be resolved.*

He echoed Xanana Gusmao's comment that a ceasefire similar to that negotiated in 1983, would be an essential agenda item. He said:

> *It would make no sense if we were to talk and hostilities were to continue. A ceasefire would be a first step in the confidence building process. It could take three months, six months, one year - we should not set a deadline on such a course. The situation will not be so urgent when hostilities have ceased, when people are not being killed, when people are not being tortured and imprisoned.*

For nearly sixteen years the governments of the world through the United Nations have failed to resolve the conflict in East Timor. In this, the Decade for the Eradication of Colonialism, it is appropriate that it is 'we the people' represented by non-government organisations, who bring to you this proposal to begin the process of building peace in this one time Portuguese colony.

We are simply asking that **all** interested parties sit down to talk: Indonesians, Portuguese, the East Timorese - and the UN. This is East Timor's decade. And it is time to talk. Not about the past, but about the future of East Timor.